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# THE SEWANEE REVIEW

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## THE TAPPING TEST FOR IMMORTALITY

If I had not been put to bed upon the first symptoms of a cold, where I was compelled to remain for ten hours, until a doctor arrived to tell me I didn't have Spanish influenza after all, I should perhaps never have read William Morrison Patterson's book, *The Rhythm of Prose*, and thus should have escaped the sad conclusion that I can never really enjoy to the full the prose of Newman and Pater, Sir Thomas Browne and George Moore (and, I also gather from a hint of admiration in Dr. Patterson's preface, the rhythms of Roosevelt!), because I cannot beat fives against sevens. Over and over I tried it, against the headboard, upon the cover of the book, on the window ledge beside the bed, but in vain. It drove me into the same condition of fidgets that "Pigs in Clover" used to do, or one of those dreadful games where you are supposed to make as many other words as you can, in three frantic minutes, out of the letters in an assigned word. No, I am not "aggressively rhythmic," I cannot read Roosevelt with a pair of drumsticks, nor Wilson with a pencil on a table top; in short, I cannot syncopate. Yet hitherto I had innocently assumed that I was as keenly pleased by rhythmic prose, as sensitive to its effects, as, let us say, Mrs. Vernon Castle, or even Irving Berlin, "the rag-time king," whose powers of syncopation none may dispute. The world for me is not the happy place it was before I didn't have the Spanish influenza.

But lest my levity seem ill-timed in the face of so serious, so earnest, so laborious a work as *The Rhythm of Prose*, based on weeks of phonetic experiments in the physical and psychological laboratories of Columbia University, and coming to grips fearlessly with the ancient and still unsettled problem of what rhythm

is anyhow, not to mention its equally fearless consideration of free verse, and lack of consideration for free versifiers, let me hasten to add that I found more genuine enlightenment, more stimulation to technical experiment, more threads of guidance in a mazy subject, in Dr. Patterson's thin volume than in the ponderous *History of English Prose Rhythm*, which Professor Saintsbury put forth some years ago, and which was an excellent anthology improperly indexed. One result of Dr. Patterson's experiments, in particular, explained to me at least my own unconscious method of measuring and enjoying the rhythm of prose, a method I had always employed in spite of my inability to tap fives against sevens, and which was so at variance with the scansion or accent-stress methods of indicating prose rhythm that I was always uncomfortably, though inarticulately, aware of a conflict when I tried to follow such analysts as Saintsbury.

Briefly, Dr. Patterson shows that certain people, at any rate, though far from all, invariably strive to organize a unit pulse, or temporal beat, for any passage of prose (in his own case corresponding to his average footsteps, in my case rather slower), and this beat is maintained as the measure of the rhythm, the words and syllables falling in steps with it, not coincidentally, but by a process of constant acceleration and retarding, a constant syncopation, a frequent substitution of stops and pauses to fill up the time units of this underbeat, or pulse. Actually, there may be ten syllables to fill one pulse, and only one for the next. The beat may not come on a "dictionary" accent at all. If the "dictionary" accents do all fall regularly on the subconscious time beats in the reader's brain (or is it his muscles?), and if the number of syllables for each pulse, or measure, is pretty regular, then we have the sensation not of reading prose at all, but of reading formal verse. Certain iambic passages in Ruskin, for example, can easily be read into a sing-song, and with difficulty thereafter read back into the rhythm peculiar to the best prose, where accent and time beat are harmonious but not coincident. The musical pleasure of prose comes from the ease and fitness, the seeming spontaneity, with which the accents and syllables can be organized to run along above this under-drumming of the reader's time-unit pulses, giving him advance warn-

ings and delightful premonitions of when rest is coming, when a phrase is to resolve, when breath is to be taken, and often at the end triumphantly concluding on the beat.

I gather that a truly "aggressive timer," like Dr. Patterson, organizes every series of the most haphazard sounds into some sort of rhythm, because he cannot help it. He would find rhythm in a shipyard, and even a newspaper report of a prize fight or a baseball game in some sense rhythmic prose. I can confess to no such aggressiveness. In reading such prose, I do not find myself organizing it into rhythm by syncopating it over my normal, subjective unit pulses, but unconsciously *forcing my sense of a unit pulse into complete abeyance*, because it is too painful to try to make this prose step along with it. The first few words of a sentence usually give the clew, both to the length of the time pulse (which in my case varies considerably with the mood of the passage), and to the ease and comfort with which the words can be made to flow in measure, to be organized into rhythm. If the task is difficult, I give it up, and simply say this isn't rhythmic prose. But though I am thus far more limited in my rhythmic sense than Dr. Patterson's "aggressive" people, my method does not seem greatly to differ from theirs, and my sense of values in prose rhythm is certainly, like theirs, based on the ease and naturalness and melodic fitness with which the author's words, by an unconscious process of syncopation and acceleration and retarding, adapt themselves to a unit pulse-beat supplied by the reader. Prose rhythm is rapid, suspensive, sombre, and so on, according as it crowds much into a pulse, or holds over bars of silence, or prolongs a word into a whole note, as it were, or causes an unconscious acceleration of the measuring pulse, or the reverse. But it cannot be consistently uniform in syllabic division, and coincident in stress, with the unit pulse, or it ceases to give the pleasure of prose, and becomes a kind of measured verse, or sing-song.

On this subject, Dr. Patterson has, I think, scientifically confirmed what has probably been a subconscious instinct of all great prose writers, from Browne to George Moore. It is when he pushes his researches (logically enough) into the realm of *vers libre*, and then lays down the law that all *vers libre* is prose

cut into lengths by the printer, because when it is read the rhythm is timed by the reader or hearer as prose is timed, not as verse is timed, i. e. the objective stresses and the subjective time beats are harmonious (sometimes!), but not coincident,—it is then that I find myself rather violently disagreeing, in spite of the fact that I am but a feeble admirer of most *vers libre*. In the preface to his second edition, he says:—

“The segregation of the phrases in *vers libre*, produced by printing them on separate lines, serves chiefly as a means of keeping the focus of attention upon the *rhythm as rhythm*, affecting thus both silent reading and oral delivery. This ‘rhythm’ held before our attention is not so much the fundamental rhythmic experience, felt as prose or verse, but rather *the secondary or broader rhythmic grouping*, in which phrases, long and short, are *balanced* against each other, according to that native instinct by means of which we complacently make two equal five, so far as interest is concerned. To the hunter the fleeing fox weighs as much as the cows blocking his way. When once the game of literary balancing is introduced, the separate spacing of the phrases in free verse reminds us, gently but inevitably: ‘This is a phrase! This is a phrase!’ In spite of this fact, have we attained to anything that lifts us necessarily out of prose experience? What is achieved, as a rule, in Miss Lowell’s case, is emotional prose, emphatically phrased, excellent and moving. ‘Spaced prose’, we may call it. With other writers the result is often merely unrhymed verse, with irregular length of line; or, as is frequently apparent in the writings of Edgar Lee Masters, a mosaic of bits of verse and bits of prose experience.”

Now my objection to this is not that it isn’t true, up to a certain point, but that it is emphatically not the whole truth. It is a half truth because it makes poetry, as distinguished from prose, entirely a matter of rhythm, of physical pulses and stresses, and the sense of the world knows better—at least, the poets do. I will cheerfully admit that much of Miss Lowell’s *vers libre* is “emotional prose,” and not always, to me, so astonishingly emotional. I will also admit much of Masters’ work is a “mosaic of bits of verse and bits of prose experience.” But I also recall Oscar Wilde’s remark that “Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning.” Neither phrasing words in flawless

rhymed iambics nor phrasing words in a disorganized series that has to be resolved by the time-sense of the hearer, necessarily makes a work poetry, or reduces it to prose. Dr. Patterson may have shown why *vers libre* has not created a strictly new physical mould, using the rhythmic process of prose, combined with the spacial arrangement of verse to intrigue the eye; but he still has not proved that *vers libre* may not be poetry.

From a newspaper not long ago I clipped this bit of free verse, by Murdock Pemperton, called "Iconoclast":—

A puppy  
Ambling sidewise  
Intent upon the memory of some buried bone,  
Halts before my pool—  
A hollow place within my walk  
Filled by this morning's rain.  
Thirst satisfied,  
He waddles off,  
Doubtless never knowing  
His rotund stomach holds  
My mirror of infinity.

I am far from certain that the practising doctrinaires of free verse would call this a good example, technically considered. Nearly all the lines are metrical, for instance. But as the metrical scheme (probably an unconscious one) switches from iambics to trochees without apparent musical rule, it is almost impossible to read this poem (if I may so call it for the time being) as a piece of formal verse. Printed as a straight prose sentence, it reads like prose, rather simple and monotonous rhythmic prose, tending to sing-song.

A puppy, ambling sidewise intent upon the memory of some buried bone, halts before my pool—a hollow place within the walk filled by this morning's rain. Thirst satisfied, he waddles off, doubtless never knowing his rotund stomach holds my mirror of infinity.

So printed, this is easy to read—almost too easy. But if the reader does not feel that something has evaporated in the change, that something precious is wronged by considering the passage as prose, he is quite differently constituted from the present writer. This much, at least, I am sure of—the little "poem," as it first smote my eye from the columns of a newspaper, gave

me the quick, heightened pulse, the imaginative and spiritual stimulation, of poetry, and if Mr. Pemperton had not considered it as a poetic idea, had not thought that he was compacting a poem when he wrote it, but had been forced to set the idea down as prose, he would never have written it at all. Even admitting that he *might* have expressed the same idea in prose, the fact remains that he wouldn't have tried.

But I do not personally admit that he even might have expressed the same idea in prose. Putting aside the rather important fact that prose, in the complicated psychology of the race, almost invariably presupposes a *context*, so that it is only on inscriptions that a single prose sentence or paragraph ever seems complete and emotionally effective, when Dr. Patterson says that the separate spacing of the phrases in free verse "gently but inevitably reminds us: 'This is a phrase! This is a phrase!'" and then adds, "In spite of this fact, have we attained to anything that necessarily lifts us out of prose experience?" I answer, gently but inevitably, "Yes, we certainly have."

Still taking our little newspaper poem, consider first the title—"Iconoclast." It is provocative of rather large matters. Then comes the first line—

A puppy

—that is all. Seen as the first two words of a prose sentence, with the eye jumping ahead to the next words, this would lose to a large extent its charm of rather violent and stimulating contrast with the sounding title. To put it into prose spacing would be to throw away at the very start one of the aids by which the writer *lifts the mood of the reader into a different plane from the mood of prose*, gives him warning, as it were, that imaginative things are afoot, that much is going to be extracted out of little.

Continuing, we have the single line,—

Ambling sidewise

—which by its segregation concentrates the reader's attention strongly and entirely upon the puppy's amusing method of locomotion. The next line obviously is complete, shifting

and elevating our attention to the puppy's mental processes, and letting us pause for a second, if we are so inclined, to ruminate on the consciousness of the lower animals. The next line, too,—

Halts before my pool

—is complete, introducing a new element, the poet himself. The next two lines are arbitrarily divided, perhaps, in obedience largely to the writer's ear. The same may perhaps be said for the next four lines, although both lines, "Thirst satisfied," and "He waddles off," have a certain crispness of focus upon details. But after the word "holds," which ends the penultimate line, the necessity for such a stop, or suspensive pause, as no mere punctuation over which the eye leaps can give, was no doubt instinctively felt by the writer, and is instinctively appreciated by the reader. The reader knows this waddling puppy holds something more important than rain water in his rotund stomach—the whole point of the poem is now coming—What? Then our eye turns down and back to the last line—

My mirror of infinity.

What was a bit of humorous grotesquery is suddenly caught up, spiritualized, into the stuff of imagination, into poetry. We leave the poem not with a picture of the puppy but of the poet, seeing in the reflection on a rain-water pool a world of wonder, a call to dreams and vision.

If Dr. Patterson should urge that all this we have described would be impossible, or at the least difficult, to reproduce in an oral reading, I could only reply that poetry is very little written for oral reading any more, though I fancy a good reader could differentiate the spacing of *vers libre* from prose without undue jerkiness. However, I am ready to admit that in oral rendering free verse is not always so effective. It is probably not written with that end in view. The world has greatly changed its habits since "'Omer smote 'is bloomin' lyre." What I do maintain, after eighteen years of steady professional practice in writing both prose and verse, is that in creating even so slight a bit of free verse as this I have chosen for illustration (purposely selecting the work of a minor singer), the writer faces a different problem from that of prose composition, and faces it in a different



mood, seeking to create different effects, and effects which his instinct tells him are, in their spiritual essence, effects of poetry. What I do maintain is that the author of "Iconcolast" conceived, perhaps in a flash, and no doubt from a bit of observed actuality, his whimsical and yet jewel-like conception, which he both felt as poetic, that is, as burning down to a flame point of idea and feeling, without those established logical connections with past and future demanded of prose composition, and which he set about putting into such form that the reader, too, would sense the mood, feel the communicated emotion. It may very well be that he lacks the ear for formal singing required of the poet in the ancient moulds. Free verse has certainly enabled many poets to be expressive who were otherwise doomed to silence. At any rate, he chose free verse as his method, and his problem, as we have tried to show, was considerably more than a mere breaking of phrases into separate lines. It was to achieve a definite pictorial, mental, even emotional effect, largely impossible to prose, by each of these breaks, yet each with its relation to the total effect, and no doubt, too, each with its relation to what he found pleasurable to his ear, though this particular poem betrays very little consideration for any subtleties or moods of music in the various phrases or lines. If this is not a different task, at least for the writer, from organizing a prose sentence, even one of Pater's "triumphantly intricate" kind, then I have learned nothing in eighteen years of daily toil with a pen and paper. After more than eighteen years of eager reading, too, I find, for myself, that the results of such a task give a different emotional effect from prose, always admitting, of course, that the subject treated must be the stuff out of which poetry can be made—a reservation that holds good, as well, in considering metred verse, save for those naïve beings who find "poetry" and jingle synonymous.

After all, there is an inescapable mystery about poetry which no tapping test and metrical rule of thumb will ever resolve.

—In such a night  
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand  
Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love  
To come again to Carthage.

This was one of the passages, was it not, which Arnold quoted as infused with "Celtic magic"? The magic is surely there, and how much or how little it resides in the formal metre, the measured time, no man can say. Put it in any other arrangement, and the magic is gone; but put it, with different words, in the same arrangement, and it is gone, also. There is something here which inevitably reminds us of Poe's theory of the transcendence of reality, the capture of that unearthly beauty of perfection for which the soul hungers and weeps, as necessary to true poetry. Possibly it is not open to dispute—as yet, at any rate—that the practitioners of *vers libre*, by missing what we have always called music, miss the most potent single aid to this sense of transcended reality. But when they find in the observed world, or in the stirrings of their imaginations, those promptings to hunger and quest after "divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses," and taking up their pens are self-impelled to express those promptings in a form they differentiate from prose because they do not, and cannot, feel themselves delivered in the conventional prose medium, I cannot find it justly open to dispute, that then the writers of free verse are essentially poets; and to judge them by the mere physical standards, the tapping tests, either of spoken prose or spoken metre, is rather beside the mark, or, at any rate, considerably below it.

Free verse may have released on the world a great many prose essays and short stories and fantasies, cut up into lines. For that matter, formal verse has released on the world Kipling, Robert Service, and the Sweet Singer of Michigan. So have the graphic arts released James Montgomery Flagg and Howard Chandler Christy. What of it? I do not even say that I tremendously enjoy the best of free verse, or, at least, not nearly so much as I enjoy formal singing. But I do say that among the genuine artists the urge of an idea to prose expression and the urge of an idea to expression in poetry are two separate and easily recognizable things, and when such a genuine artist is impelled to seek expression in *vers libre* rather than in prose, he is thereby faced by a different problem, seeks a different

effect, and to the sensitive reader, who is not obsessed by mere metrical measurements of rhythm and metre, is creating something which is not prose and which by the grace of the muses is sometimes, at least, poetry, one of those transcendencies of reality of which Poe speaks, taking us up, as prose can never do, into regions "where Israfel hath dwelt." If a writer can do that, I am quite ready to forego tapping with a pencil on a table the syncopations of his rhythm to find out if he is writing prose. I know perfectly well that he isn't.

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